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Neocolonialism, empowerment or no big deal - Implications of new EU rules for organic group certification on third countries

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Abstract

Organic farming is the only form of food production strictly governed by legislation that provides for stringent standards and robust control from farms to consumers. The EU organic sector has seen tremendous growth in recent years and is currently worth approximately €27 billion. The EU's Farm-to-Fork strategy, its Organic Action Plan and various national strategies have elevated the status of organic and support its development in the coming years. A significant share of the organic market comes from imported commodities such as cocoa that are grown by smallholders in countries of the global south. The rapid growth and increasing competition however have created challenges to ensure organic integrity and to uphold consumer confidence that is essential to justify the organic price premium. The new Organic Regulation (EU) 848/2018 which takes effect from January 1st 2024 inside the EU and from January 1st 2025 for third countries contains several provisions to strengthen confidence in organic products, especially imported products.

Notably, Article 36 of Regulation (EU) 2018/848 introduces stringent requirements for certifying smallholder groups. Previously, large importers could take care of the certification process on behalf of smallholder groups, but now, groups need to form a separate legal entity, install an own Internal Control System and assume all the cost and administrative burdens. The regulation also contains size limits for smallholder operators. Proponents of the new rules claim, that they create fairer competition and eventually strengthen the position of producer groups in the value chain. However, others accuse the EU of neocolonialism, as the certification rules modelled after EU standards, create insurmountable hurdles for many small producers in the global south. Our study, investigates the impact of the regulation on Ghana's organic cocoa sector through semi-structured qualitative interviews with relevant stakeholder groups. Results show a nuanced picture. While creative strategies by private actors dampen the negative effects and question the idea and legitimacy of the new rules, there is the problem of a perceived uncertainty about concrete implementation. We finish by making some concrete proposals on how EU rules could better match the situation and adequately reflect the EU's relevance and responsibility.

Keywords: Certification, neocolonialism, organic farming, regulations